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WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF
Natural Resources



Oregon Fire Chief's
Association

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Northwest Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (MAC) Sets Fire Resource Priorities

PORTLAND-Coordinating a large fire has been compared to conducting a military exercise; the support required to make sure that firefighters on the fireline, airtankers and helicopters in the sky, and fire engines are meeting fire management objectives while at the same time remaining safe is staggering in scope. From fire operations planning, to infrared mapping, to keeping fire crews fed and showered, no detail is too small.

The next step up the wildland fire coordination ladder is the interagency fire centers in such places as Lakeview, Burns and LaGrande, Oregon, and Wenatchee and Spokane, Washington. Federal and State agencies work together to prevent, protect and suppress wildland fires in their part of the each state. Existing cooperative agreements and increased funding through the National Fire Plan help to extend wildland firefighting capabilities to meet the challenges of Oregon and Washington's fire season.

The Northwest Interagency Coordination Center (NWCC), in addition to the state of Oregon and state of Washington Coordination Centers in Salem and Olympia, directs the movement of regional wildland firefighting resources in Oregon and Washington. NWCC works in concert with the National Interagency Coordination Center located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. During the heart of the fire season--which hit Oregon and Washington in the first week of July this year--the Coordination Center operates 24 hours a day 7 days a week to fill wildland firefighting resource orders to the hundreds of fires burning in Oregon and Washington.

On July 14th, 2002, the Pacific Northwest Wildland Fire Group (PNWCG) activated a Northwest Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (NW MAC), located at the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center in Portland. The PNWCG is made up of representatives from the Washington Department of Natural Resources, Oregon Department of Forestry, USDA Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the Washington and Oregon Fire Chief's Association.

"Staffing a wildland fire is a logistics challenge of the highest order," said Gary Larsen, NW MAC Coordinator, and Mt. Hood Forest Supervisor. "The NW MAC works to help resolve the logistic challenges."

The NW MAC group representatives (from the same agencies that make up the PNWCG), are given authority by their respective agency administrators to set priorities and make critical fire management decisions to address the fire situation in Oregon and Washington. In addition to staying in close contact with the incident commanders of individual wildland

fires and complexes of fires, the MAC group is briefed twice daily about current and predicted weather conditions, and receives frequent updates on large fire activities.

From 7 am to 9 am, the NW MAC representatives gather information from incident commanders. At 9 am, the NW MAC meets to receive a national briefing from the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. Then the NW MAC receives in-depth fire weather briefings from NWCC fire weather. The weather briefings include predictions on thunderstorms and accompanying lightning, potential for winds, and drought indexes. The Northwest Interagency Coordination Center Predictive Services group provides the NW MAC with a “wildland fire forecasting report” looking at factors in Oregon and Washington that historically have led to large wildland fires.

At 10 am, the NW MAC considers all the information from the morning briefings and sets fire incident priorities based on the following prioritization criteria:

- 1) Potential to destroy or harm human life
- 2) Potential to destroy communities, community infrastructure, historically significant cultural resources, commercial business, year-round homes, seasonal homes, barns and utility buildings.
- 3) Potential to adversely impact cultural and natural resource values
- 4) Probability of meeting incident (fire suppression) objectives

An Incident Priority list is posted daily at www.or.blm.gov/nwcc. High priority wildland fires making up the first third of the list are a potential immediate threat to personal safety, to homes and/or communities and therefore need and will receive the first available firefighting resources. The medium priority wildfires making up the next third of the list also may pose a longer-term threat to residences or other buildings, as well as valuable private timberland and will also be highly considered for resource allocation. The final third of the list are large fires or fires that could grow large, but are not an immediate threat to homes or communities and will receive additional resources as soon as they are available.

The Incident Priority list may change as firefighters make progress, weather changes, or new wildland fires occur. The NW MAC state and federal wildland fire management representatives prioritize the incidents twice a day through a complete consensus process meaning that all representatives agree on the order of the list.

A major function of the NW MAC is to seek interagency solutions to difficult fire coordination issues. The MAC group pursues all opportunities to increase fire suppression resources available from local, state, and federal agencies, private vendors, and National Guard and US Military, as needed to support firefighting efforts. The MAC group assures that these resources are trained and deployed as effectively as possible.

“The key is placing the right resources, at the right place, at the right time,” said Gerry Day, NWCC Center Manager.

In recent years, the NW MAC was activated in 2001, 2000, 1996, and 1994.